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ABSTRACT

Current research in early childhood suggests the need for increased small group instruction, variety and quality of materials, and support for teacher innovation. The use of a literature-based curriculum in the kindergarten offers both a means of bringing about these changes and an alternative to the very structured atmosphere now prevalent in many kindergartens. Literature circles which branch into larger curriculum structures give the kindergarten child the opportunity to become a critical thinker, a contributor to the curriculum, and a critical reader and writer. This paper provides examples of ways in which teachers can group their literature collections into texts sets, author sets, and themes sets for use in small and large group work. Also included are suggested readings, a bibliography grouped into texts sets, suggestions for themes and units, and a list of children's authors who will respond to communication from students and classes. (Author/RH)

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LITERATURE BASED CURRICULUM IN THE KINDERGARTEN

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ABSTRACT: LITERATURE BASED CURRICULUM IN THE KINDERGARTEN

Current research in early childhood suggests the need for increased small group instruction, increased variety and quality of materials, and increased support for teacher innovation. Literature based curriculum in the kindergarten offers a way to implement these suggestions and an alternative to the very structured atmosphere now prevalent in many kindergartens which purports to "get children ready for first grade." Literature circles which branch into larger curriculum structures give the kindergarten child the opporuntity to become a critical thinker, a contributor to the curriculum, and a critical reader and writer. The paper gives specific examples of how teachers can use and group their literature collections into texts sets, author sets, themes sets for use in small and large group work. Suggested readings, a bibliography grouped into texts sets, etc, suggestions for themes and units and a list of children's authors who will respond is included.

LITERATURE BASED CURRICULUM IN THE KINDERGARTEN

It used to that be kindergartens were child-centered programs and that evaluation by readiness and standardized tests was criticized as irrelevant at best and harmful at worst. But calls for reform and accountability in schools have led to a "back to basics" mind set at all grade levels including kindergarten. Now testing has become much more prevalent in public kindergartens. Unfortunately, the "basics" have translated into heavy doses of isolated skills, seat work, and a regimented curriculum. According to Darling-Hammond & Wise (1985) teachers are very likely now to shape their curricula to match the emphasis on the standardized tests. The unfortunate outcome is that control of the curriculum is slowly being transferred away from teachers and given to the test making agencies. But the fact of the matter according to Meisels (1989) is that

> There are presently no readiness or achievement tests sufficiently accurate to serve the high-stakes functions they are being asked to perform. Rather, we are witnessing a major misuse of tests in the early childhood years. Consequently, a number of national organizations have adopted the maxim that tests should be used only for their intended purposes--to obtain the best and most appropriate services for the greatest number of children. Since readiness tests generally do not have predictive validity, and since they are often used to place children in extra-year programs that do not have demonstrable efficacy, their use for predicting future school functioning should be halted (p.20).

Meisels and others have suggested alternatives to testing in the reformulation of early childhood curriculum and

classroom organization. Some typcial suggestions are limiting class size, providing additional instructional assistants and tutors. These options are not always available to school districts with limited funds. However, there are some suggestions from current research which we can begin to implement today: increased small group instruction, increased variety and quality of materials and resources, and increased support teacher innovations. The following description of several teachers' use of good children literature as the basis for kindergarten curriculum is one such innovation going on a classrooms today.

Many teachers today would like to find middle ground between the very structured atmosphere which purports to "get children ready for first grade" and a unstructured environment where the children interests determine much of the curriculum. Literature based curriculum seems to offer a reasonable transition. Literature circles which branch into larger curriculum structures give the kindergarten child the opportunity to become a critical thinker, a contributor to the curriculum, and a critical reader and writer.

LITERATURE CIRCLES IN THE KINDERGARTEN

Texts Sets - Themes

A small group of kindergarteners is in a circle on the rug. Each day this week, they have read and discussed with their teacher a different book about fears. Today they are

discussing their own fears and some aspects of book which help them to read. As the teacher begins the discussion, she directs the children to the texts themselves.

"Can you read this book?," says the teacher.

"Yeah," says Richard.

"How can you read it? What does it say on this page?"

One child reads the predictable page, and says, "Well, it says that on every page. That's how I can read it."

"Is there anything else which helps you read it? What about all these words? How can you read them?"

"By your mind and by the pictures."

Then the teacher holds up a class favorite, It Didn't Frighten Me, by Janet Goss and Jerome Harste.

"Oh. I know that one!," says Jason.

"I can read that," Richard chimes in.

The teacher continues to help the children focus on aspects of the text which support reading: "What did the authors do to help kids read these books?"

"They didn't put many words in."

"They didn't put too hard of words in."

"And the pictures help you, too!"

"Sometimes they put the same thing on every page."

Although these children are beginning readers in the conventional sense of decoding, they are becoming sophisticated consumers of printed text. Their "book sense" and understanding of what an author does to help children read will provide a wonderful foundation for further reading experiences--th real readiness for reading.

The teacher continues.

> "Now let's think about all these books we read this week. Talk to me about these books. What did you think of when we read them? How did they make you feel?"
>
> "Scared!"
>
> "Some books were about not being scared!"

The children then began to relate their personal experiences about being scared. Jason began,

> "I remember when my whole class took a walk. And we went by a real scary house and I heard a witch voice."
>
> Teacher: "Did your mama tell you there aren't really any witches like the mama in the story does?"
>
> "No because I never asked her."
>
> "Last Halloween my dad asked me if a saw the witch fly over the moon," says John.

After some discussion of personal experiences, the teacher continues: Why do you think the authors wanted to write these books?

> "They thought they would be good for kids," said Jessica.

The discussion continues and the teacher and children generate a list of center activities which they could do related to the books they have read.

Texts Sets - Paired Texts

Another group of children is gathered on the rug close to the blackboard. Their teacher has found two books which offer similarities and contrasts in subject, illustrations and themes. These "paired texts" are often books which surprise the reader with an unusual twist on a familiar story. Today the paired texts are Deep in the Forest" by Brinton Turkle and Goldilocks and the Three Bears." The Turkle book is the story of a little bear cub who wanders into the house of a little golden-haired girl. The cub eats their food, sleeps in their beds and breaks a little chair. Sound familiar? Another nice aspect of the Turkle book for

kindergarteners in that it is wordless. After hearing Goldilocks and the Three Bears the children may tell the Turkle story from the pictures using the language of the first story.

The teacher begins to read the "Goldilocks," pausing at predictable spots so the children can join in. With muuch enthusiasm they read this old favorite. Then she begins the second story. Since this is a wordless book, they look at all the pictures first and then come back and tell the story from the pictures. Then the teachers asks the children to think about what things are alike and what are different in the two stories.

"Something that is alike is that they both have bears."

"They found a bear in the bed and they found a person in the bed."

"Yes, but that's different. One is a person and one is a bear."

"But it's still the same because they are both in the bed.

A lively discussion about "alike" and "different" ensues.

"They are both in the forest."

"They both live in a little house."

"There's an upstairs and a downstairs in both."

"Oh. One has words and one doesn't."

"And Goldilocks is in both books."

The discussion continues as long lists of alikes and differents are recorded on the board. The children's abilties to compare and contrast, to think through what makes something the same or different and their appreciation for author's story telling abilities were enhanced by the use of the paired texts.

Author Sets

Early in the school year, the teacher introduces a number of books by Keats, Sharmat, Zolotow, Carle and other primary level favorite authors. Each week she focuses on one author. The children become real experts in discussing the qualities of their favorite authors. This week they are reading a text set by Ezra Jack Keats. The teacher begins

this literature circle by asking the children what is same about all the stories. Darren answers,

"They all have Louie in them."

"And they all have imagination."

"Why did he write all his stories about Louie," Heather wants to know.

"Maybe we could write to Mr. Keats and ask him," says the teacher.

"Maybe Louie in his son," suggests David.

The discussion continues about who Louie is and how they can find out. They decide to write a letter to Mr. Keats and ask him. The teacher then asks the children for curricular input--what can they do at the centers during "choosing time" which would relate to the books by Keats. She says,

"For example, think about the easel. What could we do at the easel?"

"We could do pictures like in the books." The teacher begins to write their suggestions on chart paper.

"We could write a letter at the writing table."

A number of ideas for centers are generated; and the following day the children sign up for the different activities related to their books. The children paint, write books and letters, build cities with blocks, and do a huge mural of the scenes in the Keats books. At circle time these projects are shared and again related to the Keats books.

<u>The Literature Springboard: Reading to Learn</u>

Many primary classroom focus on plants in the springtime. This paired text set--<u>Jack and the Beanstalk</u> and <u>The Magic Beans,</u> by Ruth Hillert--is a great springboard into a unit on plants. After reading the two books another session of "alikes" and "differences" helps the children to think more critically about the stories and direct the group toward finding other versions of the stories. The teacher locates a cartoon video version of the story also--another source for comparison and contrast. A discussion of the live action version leads to planning for the dramatization of the story in the classroom.

The children have begun to study plants and how seeds grow. One child wants to know how the beans in the story grew because Jack just threw them out the window. They had been learning that the seeds must be planted in the soil to grow. The theme of planting and growing now takes the curriculum off in many different directions: a greenhouse with many different kinds of seeds planted, story writing about Jack and the beanstalk, "shakes those beans" math game in which the beans are painted on one side and the painted sides are added to or subtracted from the unpainted when they are tossed onto the table.

CONCLUSIONS

To reiterate, Kindrgarten teachers today must be firm in their beliefs about how children learn and what curriculum structures support that learning. If we, as teachers, fail to challenge the testing machine already becoming entrenched in current thinking about early childhood programs, then we are doing our children a disservice. Kindergarten is a time to explore language and its role in communication, to learn what authors do and how they do it, to discuss books and relate the author's ideas to their own experiences, in short, to get the big picture of literacy. Readiness and standardized tests give us the small picture of kindergarten life and a partial view at best of the children who live it. Give your children the big picture of literacy. Start a literature circle, examine paired texts, explore authors in-depth, write letters to authors, build curriculum around wonderful books. You'll help your children to become critical thinkers about reading and writing--the best readiness program you can give them.

REFERENCES

Darling-Hammond, L. & Wise, A. (1985). "Beyond standardization: State standards and school improvement. The Elementary School Journal, 85, 315-336.

Meisels, S. High-stakes testing in kindergarten. Educational Leadership, 46, 16-21.

SUGGESTED READING

Harste, J., Short, K. and Burke, C. (1988). Reading, writing, and reasoning: The authoring cycle in classrooms. Heinemann.

Harste, J., Woodward, V., and Burke, C. (1984). Language stories and literacy lessons. Heinemann.

Paley, V. Wally's stories.

Huck, C. Children's literature.

LITERATURE-BASED CURRICULUM

TEXT SETS

I. Author Study: read one book each day to the students, talk about the author/illustrator, post author's picture if possible (may be available through book clubs and publisher), read inside jacket information about the author.

- Marjorie Weinman Sharmat: stories of conflict and resolution; topic to explore: self concept
- James Marshall: two primary characters (George and Martha); topic to explore: friendship
- Judith Viorst: realistic stories about her own children; topic to explore: childhood, family
- Ezra Jack Keats: same characters throughout the books; topics to explore: fantasy, puppetry, space
- Charlotte Zolotow: deals with childhood feelings; topics to explore: stereotypes, nostalgia
- Mercer Mayer: predictable books for young/insecure readers; topics to explore: paterns, family
- Arnold Lobel: Frog and Toad Books; topics to explore: animals, friendship
- Tomie de Paola: realistic fiction, fables; topics to explore: family, death, relationships
- Bill Martin: predictable, controlled vocabulary; various topics
- Lillian Hoban: Frances books; topics to explore: family, animals
- Eric Carle: * The Very Hungry Caterpillar; topic to explore: animals The Very Grouchy Caterpillar, The Mixed Up Chameleon

II. Text Sets - Themes: the possibilities here are endless. Put together text sets based on kids' interests and include a variety of reading levels.

- Good Night Books
  Good Night Moon (Margaret Wise-Brown)
  Good Night Andrew, Good Night Craig (Sharmat)
  Good Night Fred (Rosemary Wells)
  Good Night, Good Night (Eve Rice)
  The Quiet Evening (Thatcher Hurd)
- Scary Books/Books about Fear
  It Didn't Frighten Me (Janet Goss, Jerome Harste)
  There's a Nightmare in My Closet (Mercer Mayer)
  Mama Says There Aren's Any Zombies, etc. (Viorst)
  What's Under My Bed (James Stevenson)
- Foxes
  Henny Penny
  Rosie's Walk
  The Gingerbread Man

- Friendship Books
  - Frog and Toad are Friends (Arnold Lobel)
  - Will I Have a Friend (Mirian Cohen)
  - Best Friends (Miriam Cohen)
  - That's What Friends are For (Florence Heide)
- Bears
  - Brown Bear, Brown Bear (Bill Martin, Jr.)
  - I'm Terrific (Marjorie Weinman Sharmat)
  - The Biggest Bear (Lynd Ward)
  - A Kiss for Little Bear (Else Homelund Minarick) one of series
  - A Pocket for Corduroy (Don Freeman) one of series
- Dinosaurs
  - Danny and the Dinasaur (Syd Hoff)
  - Giant Dinosaurs (Ernie Rowe)
  - All About Dinosaurs (World International Publisher)
  - Digging Up Dinosaurs (Aliki)
  - Dinosaurs (Katherine Jackson)
- Wolves
  - Adam and the Wolf (Karen Gunthorp)
  - Peter and the Wolf (Maria Carlson)
  - Little Red Riding Hood
  - Three Little Pigs
  - It's so Nice to Have a Wolf Around the House (Harry Allard)
  - A Wolf of My Own (Jan Wahl)
  - Garth Fig and the Ice Cream Lady (Mary Rayner)

III. Genre Study: gather many sources of the chosen genre from your school and public libraries (books, films, filmstrips, posters, etc.), make a bulletin board/display to announce the study.

- Nursery Rhymes
- Predictable Books
- Wordless Picture Books
- Fairy Tales
- Traditional Literature (Fables, Folk Tales)
- Poetry

IV. Paired Texts:
- Goldilocks and the Three Bears
- Deep in the Forest (Brenton Turkle)

V. Language Study

- Alphabet Books

AUTHORS WHO WILL RESPOND

Ronald Dahl
Gypsy House
Great Missenden
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